

CHAPTER 9: FAST FOOD OR HOME COOKING

I am a trueborn Belizean,
Belize my home, my native land,
I want you people to understand
I am proud to be a Belizean.

If you born there, you born there.
Tell them that you born there.
If you born there, you born there.
Tell them that you born there.¹

A WORLD OF FAST FOOD NATIONS?

It is easy to conjure up nightmare visions of the future of the global diet. Upton Sinclair's description of the Chicago meatpacking industry, published in *The Jungle* in 1906, still resonates today as a portrait of capitalism run amuck in the food market. Sinclair saw huge companies controlling a dehumanized workplace that reduced food production to a vast assembly line, churning out contaminated and unhealthy products to consumers who had no choices. How much has really changed in the chicken-processing factories which dot the southern US today, or in the huge intensive swine factory farms that confine hundreds of thousands of animals in tiny pens? One has to wonder what Sinclair would have thought of today's fast food industry, genetically modified corn, and the rapid disappearance of the venerable American family farm.

We have even more to worry about than the social critics of Sinclair's era. We know that modern food production is hard on the natural environment - we can see the fish stocks disappearing, watch the "vast dead zone" growing out in the Gulf of Mexico each year, read warnings about mercury and pesticide residues, and contemplate the oceans of fossil fuels burned up to carry huge amounts of food across continents. As mega-corporations control a growing share of the food market, they can bend governments to their will, changing or circumventing labor laws and environmental controls, squeezing farmers and producers into ever-more destructive and dangerous practices, and resisting reforms that cut into profits. Gourmets can worry about the rising tide that threatens to bury local variety and culinary traditions under the parking lots of millions of burger and fried chicken joints, or the mediocrity of upscale Applebee's, Chili's, and Red Lobsters with their standardized menus.² For a real nightmare, extend this vision to a global scale - imagine billions of Asian farmers displaced by agribusiness, all the world's cuisines flattened and homogenized.

This vision of a future "food Armageddon" connects and ramifies with the kinds of theories of empire and globalization current among many academic disciplines, which depict a postmodern world of displaced migrant workers in temporary jobs, and unrooted cosmopolitan consumers moving from one shallow experience to another. Space and place lose their meaning under what David Harvey calls time-space compression, and culture is described with terms like *flux*, *uncertainty*, *ephemerality*, and *fragmentation*.³ In the background lurks a

centralized and controlling culture industry that promotes a disneyesque experience economy, driving an endless and fruitless quest for satisfaction through buying and accumulating more and more meaningless commodities.⁴

Environmental, political and social concerns about food can lead us into other dichotomies when we think about the problems of the modern global food system. Nabham, Berry, Redclift, Schlosser and others say that industrial food is the problem, food that is controlled by large corporations. In their vision the polarity is something like big food and small food, or corporate food and gardens. What is good on one side is fair to workers and does no harm to the environment, while on the other side you have ruthless vertically integrated mega-corporations that want to turn food into just another industrial product, farms into factories, nature into raw material, and consumers into compliant boobs who will eat whatever is convenient and cheap, as long as it is packed with calories, fat, salt and chemical preservatives. There is no question that in many places agro industry has indeed turned food into just another consumer good, showing no concern for the long-term health of workers, consumers or the planet. That is what consumer capitalism does best - it makes standardized goods that maximize the bottom line of short-term profit.

But the alternative is less clear. Ideas about fairer trade and higher environmental standards, more accurate labeling, more public knowledge, a better understanding of health, and more informed and enlightened government regulation to protect producers and consumers are all important steps, but to many they seem to just nibble around the edges of the problem. The movement for bioregionalism and relocalization expounded by authors like Berry and Nabham requires a radical transformation of the world economy and really the end of corporate capitalism as we know it, as every household, town, and province becomes more self sufficient. This world looks suspiciously like a college town of over-educated organic farmers making a living at the local farmers' market. And who is going to feed the workers at the factory that makes the cars they need to drive their organic goat cheese to market every Sunday? More to the point, getting to this world is going to require a revolution, and I suspect you would have to kill a lot of people who will only give up when you pry the last Taco Bell burrito from their cold dead fingers.

It is hard to imagine how we could create an entire planet of educated gourmets, dedicated to eating local, seasonal, organic produce, bicycling down to the farmer's market Sunday mornings with their unbleached cotton bags for leaf-wrapped goat cheese and hand kneaded hearth-baked bread. Nor does it seem practical to envision a planet crowded with 8 billion people supported by self-sufficient family farms. Let's remember that at the moment more than 1.2 billion people on the planet would be delighted to have a source of clean drinking water, a fact that puts the search for the tastiest balsamic vinegar in a different perspective.

The emphasis of the *Slow Food* movement on the gourmet quality of dining tends to ignore the more prosaic dishes that people have to afford every day, which fit into busy lives, mobile families, and high tech kitchens. Most people just can't afford the time and effort to track down politically correct ingredients - even if they have the time, it is difficult to find out where your food's ingredients come from without plenty of time and a research grant. It's nice to think of a world where everyone spends their weekend at a farmers' market, and preparing huge meals for friends and family, but let's get real and recognize the element of

nostalgia in this vision. In the trenchant words of Jeffrey Pilcher, "slow food offers little to single parents working overtime to support a family in the collapsing ruins of the U.S. welfare state."⁵

We should also recognize that a lot of very traditional and ecologically sound foods are actually fast food - things prepared quickly in markets or by street vendors to be taken home or eaten while walking or riding a bus.⁶ City people have been busy and pressed for time since the first cities of ancient Mesopotamia. Nevertheless, the idea of slow food makes important points. Too often in capitalist societies, money and the market squeeze out all other values. Modern markets always tend to favor measures of quantity and price that are easily counted and measured, instead of the more difficult to measure qualities of things, especially the subtle ones, nuances that are so easily lost when all people can see is the bottom line. And food is all about quality and fine distinctions, things that are incredibly valuable, even if the elements of a Michelin star are subjective and impossible to pin down and measure with a meter or a formula.

Slow food and organic activists as well as food writers and gourmets often draw a contrast between 'authentic' historical or local food and the oppressive sameness of industrial diets. But if we look more closely at the way people use the terms, saying that one kind of food is authentic or traditional, and another is artificial or fake really makes very little sense - all food is creative in some way, and grounded in the past in other ways. How old does a recipe have to be in order to be traditional? What should we think when an old industrial food like salted (corned) beef or pickled herring becomes part of "traditional" ethnic cuisine? Are we saying the only good food is that prepared as a slavish copy, a mechanical reproduction of something made in the past? That is futile, since the past can never be completely replicated - as anyone who has watched civil war re-enactors can see.

Compromises always have to be made because we just don't live in the past any more. So who is to judge what is more authentic? Even historians and specialists with an intimate knowledge of the past cannot agree on what things looked, smelled and tasted like hundreds of years ago. Edward Bruner argues convincingly that people actually mean several distinct and different things when they talk about authenticity.⁷ Extending his ideas to food, you can have authentic ingredients, authentic recipes, or authentic utensils, and you can dress in period clothes while you cook or serve the food on replicas of the correct dishes, or just try to capture some authentic 'flavor' of the past - and none of these have to go coincide. The inevitable result of any search for authenticity is that you always end up with something completely modern in intent, since the purpose of the performance lies in the present, not the past. Let us also not forget that slavery, food adulteration, and starvation are just as 'traditional' as hearth-baked bread and home-brewed wine. Only some traditions are worth selecting for reproduction, reinvention, and remembrance.

If industrial food is so awful, so terrible for peoples' souls and the planet, why is it so popular? As Sidney Mintz has recently pointed out, we did not get the modern food system of the rich world by accident, or simply through the malign visions of greedy capitalists, but because it satisfies real demands and perceived needs.⁸ Hundred of millions have fled a farming life because it is hard, dirty, and poorly paid work. Processed and packaged foods and modern kitchen equipment have freed millions for education, work and activities they find more rewarding than the tedious hard work of grinding grain and baking bread. There are very good

reasons why people like having many choices of food, and while eating local food is unquestionably good for the environment, do we really want to deny wheat bread to Nigerians and bananas to Icelanders, or only eat fruit when it is ripe in our neighborhood?

A viable alternative to industrial food has to take these very real successes of the modern food system into account. We also have to consider the possibility that many changes in technology and the world economy cannot simply be reversed, or returned to a prior state. Once they have accepted frozen convenience foods and microwaves into their lives, most are not about to willingly give them up (though they may be willing to use them less often).⁹ The hundreds of millions of people who eat a vegetarian grain-based diet because they cannot afford meat, while they see an abundance of exotic food in shops and on television every day, are not likely to stick to their old diet when their wages rise. It seems like hypocrisy for rich meat-eaters to tell them they are better off eating millet porridge and greens for every meal.

The food system will continue to change, and it may move away from what we now call convenience foods, but that direction is not likely to resemble anything we have seen before. Visions of the past cannot serve as a guide for the possible directions the future of food can take. This need for a different vision has to move us away from the simple dichotomies of fast or slow food, industrial or hand-crafted, mass market or niche market. Remembering the billions who still need basic food security, Mintz reframes the problem in this way:

“If we cannot really change fast food; and if we cannot bring slow food to more than a modest fraction of the people of the world; then should we not aim at good food, and healthy food, for everybody? That is what I mean by foods at moderate speeds...”¹⁰

In making this point, Mintz invites us to think outside the narrow world of the rich countries, and consider a future where the rest of the world – the majority – are going in their own direction, rather than simply following in the historical footsteps of the countries that call themselves *developed*. And this brings us again to the theme of globalization that runs through all the chapters in this book.

VARIETY ON THE MENU IN THE GLOBAL VILLAGE

Apocalyptic predictions and simple dichotomies dominate ideas about globalization, just as they do when people think about the future of food. Old and stale ideas have a tendency to resurface in new guises in the debates about globalization, using new verbal clothes to cover the nakedness of the same liberal or conservative positions about the globe that dominated the cold war, and even the colonial era.¹¹ In this book I have made a case that globalization is a longstanding and continuous process, and that the localization and globalization are really part of the same phenomenon, despite the fact that they often look like opposed principles.¹² On the other hand, this dual process of globalization and localization are not static or cyclic; instead the nature of the balance and interaction between local and global is constantly changing. In each chapter I have tracked some of the technological, economic and political changes that make each period of globalization different from what came before. Another reason why globalization is always changing is that peoples’ *understandings* of global processes

are constantly changing, and this affects the way they act. In each period there are prevailing metaphors and key concepts through which people visualize, interpret and challenge the interactions between global and local. In the Caribbean an era when people thought about *conquest* and *pillage*, was followed by a time organized by the concept of *colonization* and *race*, and then a period dominated by the powerful notion of *empire*.¹³ If the late 20th century was a time when the key concept was the *nation*, the most important way that people envision and debate the current period of globalization is with the idea of *culture*.¹⁴

The awareness of culture now pervades every aspect of life in Belize, forming an essential part of the way Belizeans understand their relationships with each other, and between local and global. What was once largely unconscious - the kind of everyday experience that people just thought of as normal life and common sense - is now a matter of public debate and self-consciousness. Balinese temple rituals, once an unremarkable part of everyday life, are now seen as something culturally characteristic, that sets Balinese apart from other people. They are part of a consciousness of difference, of contrast with other groups of people who see the world in different ways and believe different things. In Belize people never really thought much about their daily food. It was just what people ate. They were certainly aware that Mayan people ate different things from Creoles and Mennonites, just as different people wear different clothes and have different skin colors. But today these daily foods are consciously produced and consumed as *Belizean food* and *roots food* and *Mayan food*; they have become emblems, symbols and metaphors where they were once simply substances that were ingested.

In this way the local, when not replaced by new imports from abroad, still becomes, in an important sense globalized. The entire world's immense cultural varieties become equivalent to each other; they become local customs, local religions, local dances that are uniform in their form if not their content. Here they eat tamales, there rice & beans. Here they are Catholics, there Moslems. The world becomes a pageant of diversity, its differences neatly organized and selected. Tourism requires a crude performance of this diversity; around the world there are political movements, indigenous musical ensembles, state offices of culture, poet laureates and university departments devoted to rendering aspects of local practices into a public, standardized format that makes them equivalent to others (often with the goal of proving their respectability, value or even superiority). They raise monuments, record folklore, preserve buildings, put artifacts in museums, and write cookbooks, following paths already well worn by generations of historians, anthropologists and folklorists.

My point is that when it comes to local cuisines, the new world order is not like the one of the 19th century. For the British and Americans during the age of imperialism, economic and cultural control went hand in hand. When you took control of a new territory, you remade it, spreading not just the benefits of modern capitalism, but also the joys of civilization. Empire really was a system that sought to implant European culture around the world, because of its innate superiority (a position still taken by some).¹⁵ The 'civilizing mission' was a public justification for economic expansion, but it was more than just an ideological smoke screen. The generations of young English, French, American and Dutch administrators and technocrats who left for the colonies and possessions were often true believers, who had a missionary zeal about their work. Rather than

adapting themselves to the local food and customs, they demanded that locals adopt theirs'. The Englishman in Belize at the turn of the 19th century wanted an English dinner, even if it had to be poured from cans.

Globalization at the turn of the 21st century is far different in its cultural shape. While the economy of the colonial period seemed completely interwoven with the missionary goal of cultural uniformity, global capitalism today has made peace with cultural diversity. Partially this is the simple result of a change in the nature of the world economy, which is no longer entirely based on the flow of material goods. Instead 'services' are now imported and exported from country to country; ranks of women in Barbados spend their days entering data from documents flown in from the USA. When your software stops working and you call the "support" line, the person who answers the phone is likely to be a Bangalore night-worker. The largest and most aggressive multinational corporations are taking over services like water, electricity, garbage disposal, and insurance in countries all over the world. None of this expansion requires that people give up their own culture. It helps if they learn English, but it makes no difference at all if they want to wear a turban or fast for Ramadan.

The influence of tourism, the world's largest industry, is even greater and more pervasive. On one hand tourism requires a dramatic economic restructuring of peoples lives in a place like Belize. Tourists want air-conditioning and smooth roads, safe streets, polite waiters and clean beaches. This requires an enormous concentration of capital and construction; it draws people from wide areas to provide services, often in a relatively small tourist enclave on a coast or in picturesque mountains. Even ecotourists who wander through the rest of the country want running water, educated guides, and a comfortable clean bed at night.

But the globalization of the tourist industry pushes culture in entirely the opposite direction from earlier colonialism and imperialism. Instead of demanding the spread of European civilization, tourists revel in everything local, different, 'cultural.' In truth they want things both ways. On one hand they want their American style clean room with a telephone that works and a color TV, and on the other hand they want to experience *the real* Belize. The kind of cultural diversity that tourists want is the safe, domestic form. It is a performed difference, coded in distinctive music, dress, dance and food.¹⁶ It is not the threatening in-your-face kind of ethnicity, the hostile faces people who resent having their sacred places profaned by visitors, or their rivers dammed up to provide clean water for the hotels. In the tourist world, culture is an object that can be detached from the people who produce it, that can be shared and even experienced by the visitor, who wants to go home with the taste of 'real Belizean food' in their memories. And there is no question that producing and performing culture for tourists can be a decent-paying job. You can make a good living cooking up the right mixture of exotic and familiar, at least compared to the other options, which might include scavenging from garbage heaps or piecework in a Chinese shirt factory. And at least some farmers can make a living producing the eggs, mangoes and avocados for the hotel's breakfast table.

A world where culture and the political economy are disconnected from one another can be a peculiar place, filled with ironies, backstage jokes, and hidden tragedy. A Guatemalan woman might see her grandmother's old worn-out woven shirts sold for pennies then become valuable collector's items. A Belizean farmer may find that the birds he has always killed and eaten are now exotic endangered

wildlife that attract thousands of birdwatchers. Old traditions may be revived, but then performed completely out of context so they have no real meaning to the participants. American Peace Corps volunteers teach rural villagers to make stone carvings based on ancient artifacts, which then become a traditional local craft. Lobster, once a food for the poor, becomes so expensive that no local person can afford to eat it any more.

These ironic disconnections can be painful and grotesque when seen from the point of view of poor people who are having their culture taken and appropriated and used for the profit of others. What does it feel like for the Asaro people of New Guinea to have their sacred religious dances performed by well-off Australians in an advertisement for an airline?¹⁷ What do you want to eat after a day of serving up jerked chicken to tourists on the beach? Does it hurt a country when 'folk' music changes from something everyone sings, to something everyone hears at concerts or on local television?

These are subtle and profound questions, much debated among anthropologists, folklorists and other academics, as well as by media professionals and in popular culture. But the basic point is that cultural diversity is hardly in danger of dying out. Culture has become a key commodity in the world economy and a basic tool of government. The question, though, is what kind of relationship this performed, self-conscious kind of culture has to the practices of everyday life, and how well it is grounded in ecological and economic realities. Is public, performed culture sustainable, or does it merely become a tool, an artifact that is quickly taken out of the hands that made it and used for other purposes? When we think about cuisine as a part of culture in this way, we can easily see the dangers involved in taking cooking and recipes out of popular culture and putting them in the hands of marketers, tourist impresarios, and the celebrity chefs of expensive restaurants. What happens to a cuisine that is cut off from its roots in everyday kitchens, in the hard work of farmers, and the bustle of the marketplace? We can also turn the question around to ask what happens to a *country* where that connection has been severed?

BIODIVERSITY AND CULIDIVERSITY

I will use the term *culidiversity* to refer to the diversity of cuisine and recognized styles of cooking in a region. I don't think in the long run we run a danger of losing culidiversity. If anything as world incomes rise and communications and global travel increases, there is more, rather than less culidiversity than there was under the crushing influence of 19th century nation-states, intent on imposing a uniform culture in their entire territory. Culidiversity is probably being rearranged in important ways that are not yet clear; we may be seeing more diversity in some places and less in others, or more diversity within cities, and less between different cities. Certainly we no longer see a world where the diversity of cuisine can be understood as a series of little uniform regions or territories, each with its own distinctive flavors. Instead, the culidiversity of the 21st century has less and less connection to local products, to the ecological zonation, histories of human modification and land use, and peculiarities of climate, soil and geography that cause biodiversity in the physical environment. Should we be worried that what people eat is no longer limited by location, that culidiversity has been freed by industrial production methods and burgeoning world food trade, from the constraints of geography?

One possibility is that there is no reason to worry, that local culture and the local economy do not *have* to be connected. Orthodox economists tell us that a world where free trade moves food from the countries where it is cheap to those where it is more expensive to produce is better for everyone; it should improve standards of living and therefore give people more leisure time to pursue cultural expression. Why should a country like Belize or Nigeria worry that more and more of its basic foods are imported from rich countries which pour subsidies into efficient 'factory farming'? If farmers in Kansas and Louisiana can feed the world cheap rice and wheat, what's the problem? Why should we worry when cheap American frozen chicken arrives in Senegal, and drives more expensive local birds out of the market? Interdependence, say the advocates of free trade, promotes political stability and prosperity.¹⁸ Perhaps ideas like local food security or self-sufficiency are outdated and unrealistic, or simply a product of nostalgia.¹⁹

On the contrary, I would argue that there are a number of very good economic and social reasons why nations and regions should still be concerned directly with promoting local food production, and protecting at least part of their food economy from imports.²⁰ These are long term problems that outweigh the short-term benefits of cheap imported convenience food on the store shelves.

Probably at the very top of the list is the simple fact that more than half of Belize's population is still rural, which means they are involved in various ways in farming. Export crops like bananas and citrus generally offer low-paying jobs for landless workers on large farms; while intensive food production on small farms could provide a viable livelihood if there is a steady market for high-quality products. Small farmers in Belize are never going to be able to compete with large mechanized operations for bulk crops like rice, corn and beans. Belizean farmers only have an advantage in specialty crops, niche markets, and high-value products (which today includes organically grown)- many of which are already in demand to feed tourists. A viable farm economy would keep people stably settled, instead of migrating to cities or out of the country altogether, at a time when there simply are not enough jobs in tourism and in the cities for all Belizeans.

At the most basic level, countries that cannot feed themselves, which do not export basic foodstuffs, are in a position of dependency in relation to the rest of the world. Of course all countries depend to some extent on foreign trade - its impossible to imagine the US economy without oil imports for example, but we can also see how this constrains, distorts, and limits US political options in the oil-producing regions. Today Belize is far more dependent on imports than the US or any other major economy; furthermore it exports luxuries and imports necessities. As we saw in previous world wars, this leaves the country vulnerable to disruptions of supply and sudden rises in prices. The whole country was paralyzed for months in the late 1970s when gasoline imports were suddenly reduced. Today we should also consider the possibility of disruptions in finance, monetary crisis, and rising debt that could make it difficult to buy needed supplies.²¹

Even if supplies are reliable, being a food importer means that Belize has little control over the *quality* of the food it consumes. The problem may not be as severe as in the 18th century, when nobody really knew what was in a barrel of salt pork until it was opened, but today the variety of possible contents is immeasurably greater. Belize is not in a position to decide if the country will eat genetically modified corn, or irradiated meat, or to test for toxic chemical residues, unless producing countries decide to require it. Because as a small market they have little power to ask for higher standards from producers and

exporters. Many manufacturers of food products in the USA who have to reveal the full contents and nutritional properties of the products they sell at home have much less informative labels for the products they export to poor countries. This opens up the possibility that countries are dumping contaminated or substandard products they can't sell at home onto foreign consumers, just as the pharmaceutical industry is often accused of doing. And without huge and expensive laboratories and the money to fund a testing program, Belize just has to eat what it gets, and hope that it not poisonous. At least in the old days you could tell when the pork was spoiled! Now if beef is contaminated with e. coli you may not know until your children get sick, and it may take years to find out if your ground beef came from a mad cow.

Food quality is only a problem if you have the money to buy food in the first place. Belize is not impoverished compared to its neighbors, but there are still plenty of poor people, and surveys always find a substantial fraction (from 10-30% depending on definitions) of children who are malnourished.²² This is one good reason for a government to interfere with free markets for food - to subsidize basic foodstuffs for hungry people. In rich countries this subsidy ends up supporting prices for domestic food, therefore supporting farmers. When poor countries subsidize food imports to feed the poor, they are also supporting farmers in rich countries, when they would be a lot better subsidizing their own. There is no reason why food support policies to feed the poor should not be used to promote the kinds of local farm production that are going to be best for the country in the long term, including organics.

Agricultural policy in places like Belize has typically been aimed towards generic export crops or a few basic foods for the local market, and the emphasis has always been on increasing productivity with improved seeds, farm technology, fertilizers and pesticides. Decades of studies have shown how unsustainable this kind of mechanized farming is on fragile tropical soils, in comparison to smaller-scale and more intensive farms using polyculture, locally-adapted crop varieties, biological pest controls and organic methods. Producing more food for a local market using methods like this would be much easier on the environment, and more likely to preserve the biodiversity (and by cutting erosion and runoff the tropical reefs), which are now the main attraction for the tourism business.²³ Instead of pursuing ever-changing and difficult export markets for generic tropical products like sugar, Belize would be much better off re-orienting agriculture towards producing high-quality and diverse foods for the growing local tourist market. Right now a great deal of the money tourists spend in Belize goes right back out of the country to buy expensive imported food for their meals.

Of course, even in the most optimistic scenario for Belize and other poor countries, food trade is never going to disappear - and there is no return to clumsy government price and market controls like those the British Empire instituted between the two world wars. The choice governments make cannot be reduced to free trade versus protectionism, as much as political ideologues would like to portray it so.²⁴ Trade must be made fairer, and future trade regulation has to pay as much attention to food quality, damage to the environment, and the rights of workers as it presently does to the interests of agribusiness and the farm lobbies of rich countries. It is time for Belizeans to think more about the quality of food as well as the quantity, and to ask if sometimes farmers and consumers are better served by less trade, less technology, and less distance between farm and market.²⁵

Reconnecting culidiversity and biodiversity has the potential to revitalize and benefit both. An active market for local fresh foods and spices could support small-scale agriculture in the Belize countryside, revive interest in exotic and rare varieties of fruits and vegetables, and build a market for hand-made products and organic produce. Food could even become a reason why people go to Belize, instead of being something they ignore or endure. All around North America and Europe there are active movements to find new ways to connect producers and consumers through local markets, forge direct connections between farmers and restaurateurs, and support rare and endangered crops, varieties, and handmade food products. In rural Belize the diverse landscape of family farms and local markets has not yet disappeared, but why should we wait for it to be further endangered before we find ways to support and nurture it?

HOME COOKING

One of the greatest problems Belize has faced over the last three centuries is the sense that the country is stuck in the past, which means that people are always looking to developed rich countries for the next bright idea that will solve their problems and lift them out of their peripheral position in the world. But somehow all these years of ideas flowing from England and America have left Belize just as far behind as ever, still struggling to catch up. With this record, why should Belize look to the slow food movement or the bioregionalists or any other group in the rich North for ideas about making the local food situation better?²⁶

Thinking realistically about a future for places like Belize, I don't find that slow food, or bioregionalism, or an obsession with authenticity provide a viable and convincing alternative for the future, the kind of vision that could move a nation or push a government to change its policies in the face of very rich and powerful interests. Maybe a different approach would be to return to the very old and well-worn concept of *home cooking*. I don't mean this literally in the sense of cooking at the hearth, because a group of friends or family, a town, or a country can also be home. In today's world home may include both a house in a rural Belizean village and an apartment on the north side of Chicago.

But metaphorically *home cooking* means a cuisine that is grounded in familiar, shared history; in common knowledge of places and people. Home cooking is always concerned with quality, because the food is going to be eaten by people you care about. Home making is a social process of transformation, the magic that makes the anonymous commodity into something unique with an identity, a name instead of a brand. In the context of home cooking, quality does not eliminate economic considerations; it is economical instead of wasteful, pragmatic because of the need to feed a whole family from limited resources. Compromises have to be made, but the well being of the family is the bottom line, and the goal is never just physical nutrition of the body, but instead the nourishment of the person. Home cooking is grounded in a past and a particular place; it is all about origins. But a home is always a place where people raised in different families come together to combine and recombine their own traditions. Different traditions and versions of the past are melded and recombined into something new, that is in turn handed down to the next generation not as a hidebound set of rules, but as an assortment of recipes and a set of values to guide a new family that will face a changing world, so it is never a mechanical reproduction of the past. Home cooking is humane, founded in the best aspects of

social life, cooperation, generosity and compassion, willingness to work together even when it means sacrifice and compromise.

In a global economy of constant flow and movement, being homeless is the equivalent of being powerless, at the mercy of the tides and currents, unable to find a place of refuge. But a home is not an economy or a world in itself - it is in the world and of the world at the same time that it has its own boundaries. Homes are not little states, and a world of home cooking does not require the destruction of the global economy. It just ensures that people have a place to live where they are protected from the worst that economy has to offer.

You have to admire the way the Belizean spirit keeps struggling to the surface after every wave, against all odds putting together something unique from the bits and pieces of debris left behind by colonists and empire. You have to be nimble and creative so survive and find an identity in the unstable breaking surf out on the edges of the world capitalist sea. Belizeans are survivors who still manage to find joy and build homes in difficult times, even though foreigners own most of their country's resources. Belize shows it is possible to have real home cooking even in the most exposed parts of the global economy, but home cooking in Belize is in a precarious state. It could use some help.

This could mean a reorientation of agricultural policy to nurture and support the kinds of small-scale subsistence farming that have always been marginalized by foreign and foreign-trained agronomists and agricultural economists. Towns and villages might do a lot more to encourage traders and street markets instead of pushing them out of city centers and squeezing them into old decaying buildings. Supermarket owners and retailers could make much more room for local products, giving them the same kind of exposure and advertising they devote to imported frozen pizza. A lot has already been done to help local food processing and packaging get off the ground, but it is still hard to get credit and technical advice, especially for people in rural areas who lack a formal business education.

Perhaps most important, it is time for restaurateurs and chefs to pay more attention to Belizean foodways - not just borrowing local ingredients to cook exotic-sounding tropic dishes, but actually building on the traditions and the cuisine to get Belizean food into the best restaurants. It is certainly a great thing for foreigners to come and train Belizeans chefs to get into the restaurant business, but those foreigners also need to learn something from local cooks about unique fresh vegetables, herbs, spices and indigenous methods of baking and cooking.

Home cooking means that food must be intimately related to daily life and culture, that it is rooted in an economy and a physical environment. The future of Belizean food depends ultimately on the fate of the country as a whole. If the rural economy of small farms, gardens, orchards, and the forests, streams and reefs that support hunters and fisherfolk disappears, the only thing left will be factory farms, and agroindustries, and merchants busy importing and exporting. Home cooking holds out an alternative prospect, a future where the diversity of Belizean food and culture survive and flourish, even surrounded by an ever-changing global village.

Recipe: Rice and Beans²⁷

1 lb. dried Red Kidney beans (substitute canned beans if you are in a real hurry)
2 cloves garlic

1 large onion
 1 12 oz can coconut milk
 2 lbs. long-grained rice
 1/2 lb. Salted pig tail, salt pork, or cured pork hock

Soak beans overnight, or a minimum of 4 hours

Boil the pigtail or salt pork once for about five minutes to remove salt, and discard the water - repeat if necessary

Cook beans in a covered pot in about 8 cups of water, with garlic, chopped onion, and meat, until tender (or use pressure cooker)

Add coconut milk, and about a teaspoon each of black pepper and salt, and about half a teaspoon of thyme or allspice, then cook for about ten more minutes

Add the dry rice and stir thoroughly. Cover well and cook over low flame until all the water is absorbed and the rice is tender (about 25 minutes). Add very little water if needed, but don't worry if a crust forms on the bottom - it's very tasty.

¹ Verses from the song "Yu Bahn Deh" by Lord Rhaburn, a song popular in the mid 1980s. Translation from Creole by Will Jones. The song challenges people born in rural parts of Belize to take pride in their birthplaces, instead of making believe they came from Belize City. This was the first song I know of that explicitly attacked the Belizean prejudice against 'bushy' people and customs.

² Even Ritzer's critique of the "McDonaldization" of global cuisine admits that there is an upside - you know you will get something edible, and find a clean bathroom!

³ David Harvey *The Conditions of Postmodernity* (1996), see also Gupta and Ferguson (1992).

⁴ Willis, Baudrillard, simulacrum

⁵ Paper in Wilk in press.

⁶ Street food book

⁷ Bruner 1994.

⁸ paper for Atlanta volume

⁹ I make this and other points at greater length in Wilk 2005.

¹⁰ Mintz, 2005.

¹¹ I am thinking in particular of the kind of ethnocentrism that appears in Huntington's work (1996), but also about the way historians like James (2002) and Ferguson (2003) use incidents in the past as a template for understanding contemporary globalization, in ways that often seem anachronistic.

¹² Many of the most influential theories of globalization simply paste a new vocabulary, another set of emperor's clothes on the tired naked body of modernization theory - old stories about the singularity of "the West" and the progress from pre-modern to modern and then postmodern. Just as social theorists once thought of modernity being born in Europe and then spread around the world, now we have globalization carrying the same torch, though people disagree about the causes and content of what is being spread; the free market, the internet, satellite TV, or the corruption of western materialism. A Greek chorus of anthropologists stand on the sidelines and point out that local cultures and economies are not quite dead yet, despite the globalists' desire to cart them off and bury them.

¹³ If the Empire period ended with World War II, the post-war cold war balance of power may be thought of as being dominated by ideas about economic growth and development, and the debate over whether capitalism or communism offered the poor parts of the world the best chance of achieving it.

¹⁴ Hannerz, really what Appadurai is suggesting too.

¹⁵ Huntington. Contrast with "Empire." Compare to Moberg's idea of disarticulated accumulation.

¹⁶ My article on tourism and ethnicity in Belize. As Amilien says, "'Local' is associated with geographical roots, tradition, family and other factors of identity, which used to represent the popular culture of food, but the local expression of food now follows professional references and rules." (2003:189).

¹⁷ Otto and Verloop 1996

¹⁸ James, for example, (2002) blames the world depression of the early 20th century and continuing world conflict on the breakdown of free trade. On the other side there are both economic nationalists who see free trade as a threat to sovereignty, and the internationalists who see free trade as a system inevitably biased against the poor and towards large corporations that have little interest in food safety (e.g. Greider 1997, Wallach and Sforza 1999).

¹⁹ See Ahmed and Afroz 1996 for an eloquent, but often-unrealistic argument for sufficiency and security in the Caribbean.

²⁰ The laissez-faire capitalist argument is that each country should produce what it makes most efficiently, and buy everything else cheaply on the international market. If there is a trade gap, the theory goes, exchange rates will change, exports will rise and imports will fall; the problem is self-correcting and is nothing to worry about in the long term. Self-sufficiency, according to this philosophy, is not a reasonable goal in today's interdependent world economy. Specialization to take a comparative advantage in the world economy is instead the logical course.

The economic nationalist, on the other hand, would argue that a positive balance of trade is necessary to build wealth in a country, and that dependence on other countries for basic foods and supplies leads to a lack of independence in political, cultural and economic affairs. Self-sufficiency, they say, is the basic measure of economic strength and national autonomy. They would point to the examples of European, North American, and Asian developed countries, all of which built their economies behind high protective tariff barriers that forced their consumers to buy local goods.

As practical guides for the Belizean government's actions, both policies have their problems. If they follow the laissez-faire prescription and throw open all markets to foreign competition, investors from rich countries can take short term losses and drive out or buy up local businesses. Dropping import restrictions would mean an enormous cut in government revenues, since customs and excise has historically provided more than 50% of total income. Foreign monopolies can quickly end the very competition the policy was trying to promote. Local enterprises cannot get started up, because they face competition from advanced technology producers in the developed world. Belize also has the problem of competition from cheap basic commodities, handicrafts, and foodstuffs produced in poorer neighboring countries where wage rates are lower.

In reality, neither extreme is realistic or practical, and it is unlikely that Belize will ever be completely self-sufficient. But there are good reasons why Belizeans should be concerned with limiting the runaway growth in imports. The oil shocks of the 1970s were a warning to the whole world about the danger of depending on a few foreign suppliers for the national life's blood. And political prudence would argue that Belizeans need to fight for every bit of economic independence and self-determination that they can achieve. Every import that is replaced with a local product should be seen as a step in that direction. In a small economy like Belize there is also the simple economic problem that the export base of the economy is narrow, and subject to falling prices and wide fluctuations, while the price of imported consumer goods continues to rise, leaving an ever-growing imbalance in trade.

²¹ As I write Belize is going through a serious debt crunch brought on by some failures of businesses in which the government was heavily invested. The debt load in the country is very high, and at some point there may be strong pressure to once again devalue the currency, which is only kept afloat because of the large amount of dollars sent home by Belizean migrants to the US, and perhaps because of an unknown volume of drug trade. Each year as Christmas approaches, the banks in Belize begin to run out of dollars because of the high volume of imports – this could become a much more serious problem if the trade imbalance continues to grow.

²² Belize nutritional assessment.

²³ See Lansing (1991) and Netting (1993) on the sustainability of local farming, as opposed to large-scale industrial production for export.

²⁴ Madely 2000: 52

²⁵ These questions are addressed concisely by Madely (2000) in his last chapter. Goodman and Redclift (1991) provide a more scholarly and thorough treatment of the imbalances in the world agricultural system.

²⁶ Of course this also begs the question of why anyone in Belize should listen to *me*, since I am also coming from a position of privileged and wealth in the USA. All I can say in response is that I have spent more years working in Belize, listening to Belizeans and trying to understand the country from their point of view than most foreign experts, but even then I would expect people to judge my ideas on their merits, instead of their origins.

²⁷ The following recipe uses canned coconut milk, the kind available in most oriental grocery stores, though most Belizeans would prefer to make their own by soaking grated coconut meat in warm water for 20 minutes or so, then straining. Belizeans are very particular about their beans; they must be large deep red kidney beans rather than pinks or small reds. They have to be cooked to the stage where they are becoming soft, but not mushy. You don't want the beans to 'mash up' when they cook with the rice. Some cooks add coconut milk to the stewing beans for added flavor. This rice and beans should be served with some very juicy stewed meat or fried fish. Belizeans marinate their meat with fresh lime juice and seasoned salt, and stew it with garlic, onion, oregano, black pepper and red recado, a paste made from ground achiote seeds and other spices. You can find it in some Mexican food stores, or you can substitute Philippino adobo pastes. On the side there is usually a dollop of potato salad, a British introduction. To be really authentic, make this with "salad creme" instead of mayonnaise, and a small can of mixed vegetables. The final garnish is a strip or two of fried plantain. Many Belizeans like to eat this meal with something spicy; at home this is usually from a small jar filled with vinegar, a couple of slices of carrot, chopped onion and small pieces of fresh orange Habanero pepper. This recipe feeds a large Belizean-style family.